

Iran

Facts and Statistics

Location: The Middle East, bordering Afghanistan 936 km, Armenia 35 km, Azerbaijan-proper 432 km, Azerbaijan-Naxcivan exclave 179 km, Iraq 1,458 km, Pakistan 909 km, Turkey 499 km, Turkmenistan 992 km

Capital: Tehran

Climate: mostly arid or semiarid, subtropical along Caspian coast

Population: 69,018,924 (July 2004 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloochi 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%

Religions: Shi'a Muslim 89%, Sunni Muslim 9%, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i 2%

Government: Islamic republic

The Iranian Language

Iran has a heterogeneous population speaking a variety of Indo-Iranian, Semitic, and Turkic languages. The largest language group consists of the speakers of Indo-Iranian languages, who in 1986 comprised about 70 percent of the population. The speakers of Indo-Iranian languages are not, however, a homogeneous group. They include speakers of Persian, the official language of the country, and its various dialects; speakers of Kirmanji, the term for related dialects spoken by the Kurds who live in the cities, towns, and villages of western Iran and adjacent areas of Iraq and Turkey; speakers of Luri, the language of the Bakhtiari and Lurs who live in the Zagros; and Baluchi, the language of the seminomadic people who live in southeastern Iran and adjacent areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Approximately 28 percent of the population speaks various dialects of Turkish. Speakers of Semitic languages include Arabs and Assyrians.

Iranian Society & Culture

Islam and Shi'ism

Islam is practised by the majority of Iranians and governs their personal, political, economic and legal lives. Islam emanated from what is today Saudi Arabia. The Prophet Muhammad is seen as the last of God's emissaries (following in the footsteps of Jesus, Moses, Abraham, etc) to bring revelation to mankind. He was distinguished with bringing a message for the whole of mankind, rather than just to a certain peoples. As Moses brought the Torah and Jesus the Bible, Muhammad brought the last book, the Quran. The Quran and the actions of the Prophet (the Sunnah) are used as the basis for all guidance in the religion.

Among certain obligations for Muslims are to pray five times a day - at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. The exact time is listed in the local newspaper each day. Friday is the Muslim holy day. Everything is closed. Many companies also close on Thursday, making the weekend Thursday and Friday.

During the holy month of Ramadan all Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk and are only permitted to work six hours per day. Fasting includes no eating, drinking, cigarette smoking, or gum chewing. Expatriates are not required to fast; however, they must not eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum in public. Each night at sunset, families and friends gather together to celebrate the breaking of the fast (iftar). The festivities often continue well into the night. In general, things happen more slowly during Ramadan. Many businesses operate on a reduced schedule. Shops may be open and closed at unusual times.

Iran is the only country of all Muslim countries that is officially a Shi'ite state. The others being considered Sunni states.

When the prophet Mohammed died, the question over who should be his successor divided the Muslim population. What has now become the Sunnis believed the leadership of the community did not have to come from the Prophet's family, while Shi'ites disagreed. Although most Islamic countries contain members of both sects, Iran and Iraq have the highest numbers of Shi'ites.

Family Values

- . In Iran, the family is the basis of the social structure.
- . The concept of family is more private than in many other cultures. Female relatives must be protected from outside influences and are taken care of at all times. It is inappropriate to ask questions about an Iranian's wife or other female relatives.
- . Iranians take their responsibilities to their family quite seriously.
- . Families tend to be small, only 1 or 2 children, but the extended family is quite close.
- . The individual derives a social network and assistance in times of need from the family.
- . Elderly relatives are kept at home, not placed in a nursing home.
- . Loyalty to the family comes before other social relationship, even business.
- . Nepotism is considered a good thing, since it implies that employing people one knows and trusts is of primary importance.

Public vs. Private

- . Iranians see themselves as having two distinct identities: "zaher" (public) and "batin" (private).
- . When they are in public, they must conform to accepted modes of behavior. It is only within their homes among their inner circle that they feel free to be themselves. Family members are always part of the inner circle.
- . The inner circle forms the basis of a person's social and business network. Friendship is very important and extends into business. The people from the inner circle can be relied upon to: offer advice, help find a job, or cut through bureaucracy.

Taarof (Iranian Politeness)

- . Taarof is a system of politeness that includes both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- . Iranians protest compliments and attempt to appear vulnerable in public.
- . They will belittle their own accomplishments in an attempt to appear humble, although other Iranians understand that this is merely courtesy and do not take the words at face value.
- . In adherence to taarof, if you are ever offered something, like a tea or sweet, even if you want it, at first decline it until their insistence becomes greater.